

# Reviewer's report on PhD dissertation:

**PhD Dissertation Title:** *Jungian Alchemical Transformation in Breyten Breytenbach's Volume of Poetry: On the Way to Kû (2019)*

**Candidate:** K. Kuhn

**Reviewer:** Prof. Dr. Willie Burger (University of Pretoria, South Africa)

## Introduction

In this dissertation, the candidate undertakes an investigation of one of the foremost Afrikaans poets, Breyten Breytenbach, focusing on his most recent volume of poetry, *Op Weg na Kû (2019) (On the Way to Kû)*. She employs a somewhat unconventional approach, drawing on Jungian alchemical concepts in the analysis of literature and psychology. The subject matter is undoubtedly worthy of PhD-level inquiry. The volume in question spans 250 pages and contains dense poetry, prose, and visual artworks that interplay and comment upon one another. Additionally, the candidate situates this work within the broader context of Breytenbach's oeuvre, which has generated a substantial body of secondary literature. Breytenbach has been nominated for the Nobel Prize multiple times and has been recognized for both his literary and visual art contributions. His political activism, particularly his resistance to apartheid—which led to his imprisonment—further intensifies the relevance of his work. Despite distancing himself from Afrikaners, apartheid, and even the Afrikaans language on political grounds, Breytenbach continues to write in Afrikaans. This paradox is also touched upon in the dissertation.

Breytenbach's poetry is known for its complexity, characterized by intricate metaphors and eclectic references, which evoke surrealism and dadaistic playfulness. Despite these challenges, the sound and rhythm of his poetry captivate the reader, even when comprehension is elusive. Given this, a Jungian literary analysis is particularly insightful. The candidate convincingly argues that Jung's concepts from medieval alchemy open up new interpretive possibilities in understanding Breytenbach's poetry.

While earlier approaches have incorporated Zen Buddhism to elucidate some of Breytenbach's more obscure poems (especially for a Western, Christian audience), the use of Jung's alchemy offers a fresh perspective on his work.

Jungian alchemy, especially in the context of literary analysis, enjoyed popularity in Afrikaans literary criticism during the 1970s, primarily through the work of novelist Etienne Leroux and his critics. However, Jungian approaches have since fallen out of favor, largely due to the dominance of poststructuralist approaches, deconstruction, and critical theory. Kuhn's return to Jung is thus somewhat surprising, but it is also timely and offers a novel

contribution to Breytenbach studies, Afrikaans literary criticism, and literary criticism more broadly.

The research questions are clearly defined, and the scope of the study is well-contained. By focusing solely on the feasibility of applying an alchemical approach to Breytenbach's work, the candidate sets an achievable goal. While the dissertation could have made a broader contribution with a wider scope, it remains sufficient for a PhD, and future articles could expand on the study's findings.

## Literature Review

The closing paragraph of Chapter 2 demonstrates that the candidate meets the expectations for a literature review. She effectively summarizes the body of work on Breytenbach, including relevant Zen Buddhist approaches. She also maps the field of Jungian approaches to literature, situating them within the broader context of literary studies. The review provides a clear account of the development of alchemy from its medieval origins into astrology, chemistry, and, eventually, Jung's psychology, while also explaining its application in literary studies.

Importantly, the candidate identifies gaps in the literature, as expected in a PhD, and clearly outlines where her research fits in and addresses these gaps. She highlights how the themes of death, travel, the anima, and hermetic elements in Breytenbach's work, from his first volume in 1964 to his latest in 2019, invite an alchemical reading. The candidate also notes the influence of Eastern (Buddhist) ideas on Jungian alchemy, making it an apt approach for Breytenbach's Zen-influenced oeuvre.

While the literature review is extensive, two shortcomings stand out:

1. **Lack of Critical Engagement:** Despite the broad scope of the review, there is limited critical engagement with primary texts. The candidate relies heavily on a few primary studies, often quoting secondary sources where primary texts are available. This uncritical engagement weakens the analysis. For example, Rowland's (2019) opinions on secondary sources are accepted without question. Other theorists like Visagie, La Vita, Baumlin, and Dib are referenced through Rowland rather than directly. Although this may not disqualify the PhD, it diminishes the depth of critical analysis.

While the candidate acknowledges feminist critiques of Jung's concept of the anima, she overlooks other critical evaluations of Jung's work. For instance, when noting that Jung's popularity has waned in literary studies, she offers no explanation for this, again citing Rowland without further analysis. An engagement with contemporary critiques—such as those informed by neurological research that questions Jung's "unscientific" methods—would have enriched the study. Additionally, the uncritical use of James George Frazer's work, *The Golden Bough*, reflects outdated anthropological perspectives, which have since been debunked for their lack of scientific rigor and Eurocentrism.

2. **Language and Logical Flow:** This chapter suffers from occasional lapses in logical argumentation and language clarity. Some sections are sloppily written, diminishing the overall quality of the analysis. A more precise and critical use of terminology is necessary, and I provide examples of weak sentences in the "Presentation/Layout/Language" section below.

Despite these issues, the literature review is acceptable given the narrow focus of the study, though more critical reflection would have strengthened it.

## Theoretical Background

Chapter 3 offers a thorough discussion of the theoretical framework. The candidate quotes the Latin phrase, *Obscurum per obscurius, ignotum per ignotius* ("the obscure explained by the more obscure"), which characterizes much of Jung's work. Although the material is dense, the candidate ultimately provides clear conclusions, which is commendable. However, the distinction between Jung's alchemical theories and their application in literary studies could have been established more clearly from the outset. Additionally, while Jung's theories have aged, and many aspects are now scientifically untenable, the candidate occasionally seems to accept Jung's ideas (e.g., the concept of the "collective unconscious" as genetically transmitted) without sufficient critical interrogation. Some formulations, especially concerning race, reflect outdated concepts that should have been problematized. A few passages are also unnecessarily obscure or poorly phrased, as indicated in the manuscript (e.g., "Jung verduidelik dat dit kenmerkend van die Westerse verstand is dat daar geen woord is nie"). These need revision for clarity.

The final section of the chapter, however, provides a clear summary of the theoretical background and sets up the rest of the dissertation well.

## Research Aims

The research aims are clear and achievable, and the candidate has accomplished what she set out to do. While the narrow focus limits the broader impact of the dissertation, it remains sufficient for a PhD.

## Methodology

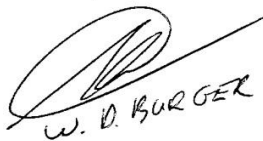
Chapter 4 is one of the highlights of the dissertation. It is well-argued, clearly written, and forms the backbone of the study. The relevance of alchemy, Jung's theories, and their impact on literary studies is expertly explained, with original insights that contribute to debates about the role of literary criticism. The candidate demonstrates a strong command of the material, and her defense of the multiplicity of meaning in literary interpretation is particularly compelling.

A more robust engagement with recent re-evaluations of close reading, such as those by Toril Moi or Barbara Herrnstein Smith, would have enhanced the chapter. Nonetheless, it is a strong and valuable contribution.

## Conclusion

I can unequivocally state that the dissertation, *Jungian Alchemical Transformation in Breyten Breytenbach's Volume of Poetry: On the Way to Kû (2019)*, meets the requirements for a PhD, and I recommend that the degree be awarded. However, before this can be finalized, minor editorial changes, especially regarding language, should be made.

Although the dissertation meets the minimum requirements, it is regrettable that some opportunities for broader engagement were missed. For these reasons I can not recommend that the degree should be awarded with distinction. I recommend that these be explored in future publications.



W. D. BURGER

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Prof W.D. Burger  
University of Pretoria  
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